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SUBJECT: GALAPAGOS: PROGRESS ON ALTERNATIVES TO COMMERCIAL FISHING

REF: Quito 1828

1. Summary. Despite lackluster efforts by the GOE, the search for sustainable alternatives to commercial fishing in the Galapagos is progressing. Projects initiated by USAID and NGOs are beginning to generate new economic opportunities that could reduce the pressure on extractive fishing practices. Although not ideal, these projects have brought the often-ostracized fishing community back into the consultative process. End Summary.

ALTERNATIVES TO COMMERCIAL FISHING

2. Along with the stability of the Galapagos National Park (GNP) and the reduction of illegal immigration to the islands, the development of sustainable alternatives to commercial fishing is considered critical to marine conservation in the Galapagos. Despite any complementary program support from the GOE (reftel), projects initiated by USAID and its nine-member alliance of international and local NGOs have registered initial success with micro-financing and technical assistance programs. The programs help the fishing sector tap into the lucrative tourism market as a source of income and provide an alternative to other profitable but environmentally-damaging fishing practices, including the (frequently illegal) extraction of sea cucumbers and shark fins.

3. Galapez, the first fish processing plant in the Galapagos, recently used technical assistance from the USAID-led Alliance to equip and administer the plant and to develop a commercial relationship with tour operators. Before, all fish served on the larger tour boats were purchased on the Ecuadorian mainland. This practice bypassed the local fishing community and undermined their efforts to produce value-added products. Fish processed by Galapez are migratory species whose capture does not undermine the viability of the marine environment. As volume increases, Galapez, which has a relationship with the fishing cooperative COPESPROMAR, will provide an important source of employment to both women and men from within the fishing community on the island of San Cristobal.

4. A grant made last week by USAID will allow COPROPAG, the fishing cooperative on the island of Santa Cruz, to develop a similar commercial venture. Earlier efforts to initiate a fish processing plant lacked the necessary infrastructure and technical planning that the USAID grant will provide. CORPOPAG Director Kleber Lopez indicated that some 40% of the 240 members of the cooperative would directly benefit from the venture. Lopez considers this an important step in their search for alternative sources of income for fishermen from his island.

5. Meanwhile, a women's cooperative on the island of Isabella utilized USAID funding to develop a fish-smoking operation that sells to tourists on the island. The operation is already commercially viable and no longer relies on USAID funding. A parallel effort by USAID also has helped another women's cooperative develop artisan products for direct sale to tourists. In both cases, the members of these cooperatives are the wives of fishermen. Participating in a tourism fair this week, both cooperatives are actively marketing their products to tour operators. Recent financial success for both of these projects has garnered a positive response from the island's initially suspicious fishing community.

BRINGING FISHERMEN BACK INTO THE FOLD

6. Buoyed by the success of these USAID-led projects, the fishing community has developed its own initiatives. Most promising is their recent proposal to allow tourists to accompany fishermen and experience firsthand how artisan fishermen work and live. This practice currently is not allowed under the Special Law that governs activities in the Galapagos. Under the proposal, fishermen would adapt their vessels for tourists, limiting the vessels' use for extractive fishing practices. A similar plan developed by the fishing community involves the use of fishing boats for scuba diving expeditions. The Joint Management Forum (JMP),

which incorporates other stakeholders such as the tourism sector, the scientific community, and local government officials into the Galapagos policy-making process, approved by consensus the artisan fishing proposal at their most recent meeting. The JMP has since passed the proposal on to the Inter-Institutional Management Authority (IMA) for implementation. The JMP and IMA together constitute a two-tier advisory and governing system in the Galapagos.

17. The involvement of fishermen in the search for sustainable economic opportunities is a major positive development. Over the past 18 months, representatives of the fishing sector had been refusing to participate in JMP meetings to protest what they felt was the excessive blame they received with respect to recent failures in the GNP's management. Their absence effectively sabotaged the development of sustainable policies for the islands. Although the GOE failed to put pressure on the fishermen to return to the participatory forum, the success of the USAID-led projects brought the fishermen back into a productive dialogue. The fishing community's change of heart also reflects a positive response to the attention paid to their community by these projects. Historically, there has been little concern shown by other stakeholders to the fishing community's economic prospects.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES?

18. While the effort to provide the fishing community with new economic alternatives is laudable, the success of these projects may inadvertently make the Galapagos more attractive to mainland Ecuadorians seeking employment. Mainland immigrants already are attracted by greater economic opportunities and a higher quality of life in the Galapagos. Estimates of the current population suggest an unsustainable 25,000 inhabitants with annual growth rates from 6-10%, raising serious solid waste management and other environmental concerns. Creating new economic opportunities could exacerbate these problems. Although plans exist for robust immigration control to better manage and limit immigration to the islands, the GOE has yet to implement them. The GOE's poor record with respect to controlling immigration to the islands suggests a worst-case outcome.

19. In addition, these new projects and proposals do little to directly keep fishermen from maintaining their unsustainable (and sometimes illegal) fishing practices. Indeed, none of these projects actually provides training to help fishermen enter a different productive sector, that is, to leave their boats and their fishing world behind. As long as the boats remain, a return to prior fishing practice is possible. In this sense, the fishing community has expanded its economic options without taking steps to shut down operations that threaten the marine reserve.

COMMENT

10. The success of these and similar projects in reducing environmentally harmful fishing will depend on the sincerity of the fishing community and the willingness of the GOE to control migration to the islands. Fishermen have for years been clamoring for alternative economic opportunities to allow them to leave their lucrative but destructive practices. Now that these options are emerging, it is up to them to take the next step. This should be easier with the active assistance of the other stakeholders, all of whom share responsibility for conserving the marine reserve.

JEWELL